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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the significance of digital publication of official government information, focusing on New Zealand. The concepts of the national state and official information are described. E-government is addressed, including benefits and risks of online publication. Three case studies are presented: (1) publication of the New Zealand First 1996 party manifesto only on the World Wide Web; (2) publication of the 1999 "New Zealand Official Yearbook" only on the Web; and (3) the recent use of the published records of 19th century colonial governments as an example of historical official publication for modern accountability. It is concluded that there is a risk that our successors will not be able to develop a sense of what early 21st century nations were like, due to a vanishing record resulting from too extreme a shift to digital publication of the official records of government. (Contains 14 references.) (MES)

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For national memory and for democratic accountability: In an on-line age, are these conflicting tensions still manageable within the construct of "official information"?

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Abstract:

Introduction

"A vanishing record" suggests a paradox. The digital paradigm expands access - a gain to democracy - but may not preserve evidence for future generations – a loss for history. The paradox is that digital publication allows an explosion of content and a gap into which has vanished much of the record of national identity.

The Nation State

Theories of the state show that the autonomous nation with wide coercive powers reached its peak in the twentieth century. The nineteenth century saw earlier loose
confederations adopt, with the impetus of new technologies, more structured forms. The twenty-first Century begins with "globalisation" driven also by new technologies - a world where governments no

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longer exercise direct sovereignty over either their defences or their economies[1]. New Zealand, a nation of 3.8 million and 2,000 km distant from its nearest neighbour, reflects these trends. Regional affiliations are increasingly valued in a nation of inveterate travellers, with a third living in one city and the rest spread out over a land mass the size of Japan. New Zealanders' lives are now more affected by decisions in the US Stock Market or in Australian politics than they are by their national government. That government has, moreover, embraced "roll back the state" precepts in the ideological belief that wide state powers are inherently both inefficient and ineffective.

To understand what the nation state of the mid-twentieth century was like, (personal memory aside) the evidence is largely in the publications of the period, conveying to future readers the facts and a sense of the general dynamic of their time. Libraries, which ensure that publications are kept over time, help people understand their national identity from such resources.

The nation state itself published for many reasons. For a democracy, informed debate depended on access to reports and to parliamentary proceedings. For an autocracy, the threat of informed debate had to be pre-empted by dissemination of "the party line". In both cases the state's official publications bore its stamp of either impartiality or of doctrinal orthodoxy. They survive in research libraries to tell us about the identity of the nation state whose authority they sought to represent.

Official Information

In a democracy, what distinguishes "official information"? The concepts of "official statistics" in New Zealand can apply: verifiable data analysed with impartiality; made available through deliberate price subsidies; and copyright clearance where wide dissemination is desirable for a public policy purpose[2]. It requires a capability to manage data as a public good. Narrow interpretations of efficiency diminish this capability, leading to shorter print runs, higher prices (i.e. less subsidy), and dissemination with a shorter timeframe in mind. In a digital world, with a diminished role for the nation state, the need for official information to feed democratic debate is accepted. There does not remain an acceptance of the need for permanence, as the state has less need of long-lasting records to assert its all-pervading authority. This risks future access to the national memory.

E-Government

The potential of the web has led to formal strategies of "E-Government", e.g. the British goal to "lead the UK in its drive to be the best place in the world for e-commerce"[3]. A 2001 survey by Accenture placed Singapore in the top "innovative leaders" group, with the UK in the second tier, of "visionary followers"[4]. Much official publishing in the UK has fragmented: Corporate Document Services (CDS) is a company designated as "the official publishers of the UK Government's Department of Social Security", while the privatized former HMSO trades knowledge economy products with a "click-use-pay inforoute"[5]. The US Bureau of Census was an early user of the web as a primary (rather than secondary) mode of publication, where data can be published quickly and continuously updated. Web delivery shifts production costs from the publisher to the consumer; while hyperlinks allow rich referencing.

Two risks in these benefits from on-line publication are:

1. the risk of the "digital divide". This may be more rhetoric than reality; predictably, those using printed official publications (analysts and libraries) are least likely to be on the "wrong" side of the digital divide.
2. the risk of confusing the original record and subsequent revisions; analysis may be difficult in the absence of stated "publication dates".

This second risk points to the paradox: the immediacy and hyper-linking of on-line publishing outweighs the longer-term benefits of having definitive records in permanent formats for consultation decades later. One intrinsic benefit of print, offsetting long lead times and high costs, is its near indestructibility. "Knowledge in the mind of a man dies with him; facts in manuscript form are evanescent, as a manuscript is easily lost or burnt. Put in print and indexed, knowledge is practically imperishable"[6].

CASE STUDY – THE 'NEW ZEALAND FIRST' PARTY MANIFESTO, 1996

Democracy is the electorate holding rulers to account. One of its basic checks and balances is the use of evidence to challenge the assertions of rulers. A recent New Zealand case epitomises a longer-term risk of digital publishing. The 1996 General Election was for the first time held under the "Mixed Member Proportional" (MMP) system to overcome the previous marginalisation of minority parties. A minority party, "New Zealand First" (NZF), won enough seats to hold the balance of power in the single-chamber Parliament. For six weeks government was in paralysis while NZF negotiated its partnership, resulting eventually in a coalition which governed with declining public satisfaction until voted out in 1999.

The point of this case study is that NZF publicized its 1996 manifesto on its website. Immediately the election result was declared and that website simply disappeared. There is no archive copy. While the coalition negotiations were going on, there was no real record of what NZF was committed to. This experience could now extend to agencies of governments. E-Government may offer fast access to complex knowledge, but equally can permit instant disappearance of knowledge. Website archiving is primitive and libraries still explore "prototypes" while the potential and actual gaps of recorded memory grow.

CASE STUDY : "THE NEW ZEALAND OFFICIAL YEARBOOK"

New Zealand is a relatively remote society where the market for print publishing is small and IT has been enthusiastically adopted. SNZ is one its largest publishers and its dataset INFOS was one of New Zealand's first on-line resources. The "flagship" publication is *The New Zealand Official Yearbook*, first published in 1897, which has long used innovative ways of presenting official statistics. It is an icon, best expressed by Oliver Duff in 1940: "The *Official Yearbook* is easily the best all-purpose volume about New Zealand for those who can thrive on iron rations. The Bible is still the best explanation of the New Zealand way of thinking. The student who can turn to the two books with an open mind will find facts in one and the colour and cast of minds in the other"[7].

In 1999 SNZ decided, after some consultation, not to publish a printed *Yearbook*, but to issue it only on the web. (Interestingly, the "success" of this move shows in the decision to publish the 2000 *Yearbook* in both print and web formats.) In 20 years time, the researcher will be able to consult the *Yearbook* from 1897 for particular years or comparatively across years. This will not be so for 1999, when future generations were not seen as part of the market for fast access. 1999 may well be "a vanishing record", because of that digital publishing decision.

These developments are matched at other agencies. Parliament itself is replacing printed statutes with on-line versions as the definitive record. The official vision describes "e-Government" as "a way for government to use the new technologies to provide people with more convenient access to government information and services, to improve the quality of these services, and to provide greater opportunities to participate in our democratic institutions and processes".[8] But how well will they empower users 20 years hence compared to the ways in which the published hard-copy output of New Zealand official agencies of 20 years ago can enable today's researchers to comprehend the recent past of current issues?

OFFICIAL PUBLICATIONS AS THE "IRON RATIONS" OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

This outcome from digitization is not confined to New Zealand; tension between immediate and longer-term effects will apply internationally. Duff's metaphor of "iron rations" is central to this argument - official publications are not the sole embodiment of national identity. They are an embodiment of the nation state, once a powerful influence on national identity and now less so. They are enduring reminders of the nation state's view of itself.

Libraries must serve both markets – present and long term. An "information age" irony is that libraries are among the few agencies equipped to serve both markets, through their commitment to preserving knowledge irrespective of the transitory swirls of fashion.

CASE STUDY : HISTORICAL OFFICIAL PUBLICATIONS FOR MODERN ACCOUNTABILITY

Contemporary democratic accountability and historical national identity are two quite different outcomes of digital publishing. The two do intersect, as a strategic policy issue for New Zealand shows - the late shows -- late twentieth century use of the published records of nineteenth century colonial governments In 1840 the British Crown signed the Treaty of Waitangi with New Zealand Maori to, in effect, guarantee stability against foreign powers while preserving the rights of tribal chiefs. Before long the influx of colonists marginalized the intent of the Treaty and by 1900 the settler government had authorized widespread confiscation of Maori lands. The details may be found in *The Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* - published as public record. This evidence, along with archival material, has been used since the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal in the 1980's to address claims for compensation.

CONCLUSION

Many academic libraries have large "Official Publications" collections built through exchanges, which are now less stable as more content is digitized and/or privatized. The output of international bodies important to New Zealand is increasingly less tangible e.g. European Union (EU) publishing is difficult to navigate. Yet the EU's websites contain a wealth of policy developments which reflect modern Europe just as the volumes of British, German and Polish official publications of earlier years did for their time. We can still look at the UK volumes of the late nineteenth century and understand from them what the British Empire was about. We can still sense from the German volumes of the 1930s the menacing fascism which had such destructive consequences worldwide. Today we can sense from the Polish volumes of the 1970's the depressing sterility of the now almost forgotten "Peoples' Republics".

The risk is that, twenty years hence, our successors will not be able to develop that sense of what early twenty-first century nations were like. The distinctive identity may show through in websites – if any survive with 2001 content. More likely, our successors will be presented with very transitory evidence – the predictable corollary of "the knowledge society" being a vanishing record which will result from too extreme a shift to digital publication of the official records of Government.

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